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ABSTRACT

This paper, which was presented as testimony at the State of New York hearing on dropouts, presents three causes for the high dropout rates of Black and Hispanic students and offers some solutions. It is noted that in large cities dropout rates range from as high as 50% to 70% among Blacks and Hispanics. The reasons cited for these high rates are: (1) personal and cultural dehumanization in the schools; (2) academic humiliation; and (3) drug addiction. These three problems are examined in some detail. Suggested solutions to the problem are given: (1) early childhood education; (2) implementation of effective schools programs; (3) curricula that are based on the cultural heritage of the affected ethnic groups; (4) academic vocational, interpersonal, and cultural counseling; (5) providing employment to students after graduation as an inducement to finish school; (6) education of the parents and community in order to provide a support network for the students; (7) assertion of political power in minority neighborhoods; (8) major financial commitment; and (9) prevention of drug abuse through education, and cutting off the availability of drugs. (CG)

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# TESTIMONY TO THE STATE OF NEW YORK LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON DROPOUTS

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Education is the most powerful social force in the history of humankind. It may be used to empower or to enslave, to enlighten or to mystify, to clarify or to confuse, to ennoble or to dehumanize, but education is never neutral. Historically, education has most often been used as a socializing process to secure the rights and privileges of those in control, while at the same time limiting the opportunities and life chances for those viewed as inferior and unworthy. Education, thusly employed, becomes a force of domination and oppression. By means of curriculum and instruction which celebrate the achievements and alleged superiority of controlling groups and which omit, belittle or distort the accomplishments of dominated groups, controlling groups are able to maintain their superior position.

Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the father of Negro History Month, wrote more than fifty years ago:

> ... taught the same economics, history, philosophy, literature and religion which have established the present code of morals, the Negro's mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor.... When you control a man's thinking you do not need to worry about his actions .... He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.[1]

The validity of Woodson's 1933 assertions is supported by the 1980 research of Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Phipps Clark. Sampling African American adults of all ages and socio-economic classes, Clark and Clark found some progress in self-image but concluded that:

> American Blacks are still involved in a turbulent struggle for self-esteem, self-respect and racial self-acceptance even as they are burdened with the negative stereotypes, self-rejection and deep feelings of inferiority which the pervasive racism of the larger society imposes upon them and their children. In spite of the removal of the more flagrant signs of racial rejection, the rise of the 1960's and 1970's, the majority of Blacks still appear burdened with racial self-doubt.[2]

Woodson's cogent analysis of the powerful and persistent effects of an educational process based in dominance and racial supremacy and the more recent findings of Clark and Clark provide a framework for attempting to understand the epidemic dropout rates which ravage African American and Hispanic communities.

Various studies have provided data detailing big-city attrition rates higher than 50%, sometimes exceeding 70% for African American and Hispanic groups. Rather than to recite numbers or to debate Board of Education statistics versus those of community groups, I will limit the balance of my remarks to causation and solutions.

Causation

In the configuration of reasons why African American and Hispanic youth leave school before completing the twelfth grade, three factors appear to tower above other causes. These factors are

1. Personal and cultural dehumanization
2. Academic humiliation
3. Drug addiction

Personal and cultural dehumanization are manifested in many ways. The most basic element is the denial of the existence of or the distortion of images of African Americans and Hispanics in the curriculum. All children need their personal worth and the legitimacy of the culture

to which they belong reflected back to them in their textbooks, in classroom discussions, in the approving glances of their teachers, in their home environments and in the mass media. For children of stigmatized minorities, the need is even more acute. An educational environment which fails to validate the worth of minority groups does further psychic damage to those groups and, thus, to their individual members.

The Report of the National Alliance of Black School Educators, Saving the African American Child defines the inextricable relationship between academic and cultural excellence:

> The suppression, destruction, distortion of a group's history and culture by others, and the surrender of one's own natal cultural forms serves to produce pathology within groups and within individuals. African American children must be given the opportunity to experience an appropriate cultural education which gives them an intimate knowledge of, and which honors and respects the history and culture of our people. Academic excellence cannot be reached without cultural excellence.[3]

A recent study of the Hispanic Policy Development Project, entitled Make Something Happen, found deprecatory school environments for Hispanic youth, similar to that which research has identified for African American students. Commenting on the effect of such environments, the HPDP study states:

> The negative stereotyping that colors uninformed non-Hispanic opinions of Hispanics tends to affect some young Hispanics views of themselves. What they hear and see in the media and the feedback they receive from some adults leads them to believe that striving isn't worth the effort...Some schools expect little from the youth but trouble. And the students respond predictably, with failure and misbehavior. Some students who leave these schools believe they are pushed out by what they perceive to be neglect or lack of caring.[4]

Much of what educators perceive as anti-social behavior is actually a statement of protest, a cry for dignity and respect. Dropping out is a final statement of despair by children who have been stripped of their humanity.

Closely related to the causation of personal and cultural dehumanization is that of academic humiliation. Children who are thought to be slow learners, deprived and standard English deficient and are not taught, not surprisingly do not learn. Low expectations for children who come from groups of low esteem result in low levels of teaching and learning. Thus the prophecy is fulfilled: children not expected to learn and poorly taught do not learn. And yet urban classrooms are filled with such children who suffer the dread of oral recitation, the agony of unsolved math problems and the embarassment of being shown up by classmates who achieve in spite of their own victimization. It is little wonder that young people who feel bad about themselves and who have not learned the skills and knowledge for school success become dropouts.

Several years ago on his television program "Like It Is," host Gill Noble asked the distinguished scholar Chancellor Williams what caused the death of the civil rights movement in America? Williams' response was a single word "drugs". Dr. Williams spoke of the plague from which organized crime profits in the billions, drugs which originally were targeted directly and exclusively for Black communities. Marijuana, then heroin, now cocaine and its deadlier derivative called "crack" are the scourge of African American and Latino urban communities. But epidemics are not easily contained within targeted populations. Granted the drugs that wreak physical and emotional destruction on countless numbers of minorities have

found their way into the mainstream and threaten the national well-being, but young people already vulnerable from diminished self-esteem, from poor health-care and the general debilitation of poverty are the most tragic victims.

Disrespected, discriminated against, bored, with few job skills and little reason to have faith in the future, many African American and Hispanic youth turn to drugs to escape reality in a momentary exhilaration. When the moments or hours pass, they are once again enveloped in awesome reality, needing ever more desperately chemical escape. Their senses increasingly more dulled, their physical conditions ever more impaired, with alienation from family and loved ones more severe, these young people drift further into oblivion. As more young people turn to drugs to escape an unacceptable existence, even the best laid educational plans will not work. The saving of minority youth and the diminution of the dropout problem will require massive interventions.

The saving of minority youth, whose eminent destruction could undo the whole national fabric, will require the cooperation of government, industry, schools, communities, parents and students. We must devise educational experiences that fulfill our students and give them the courage to confront and change their realities.

In its manifesto of academic and cultural excellence, NABSE's report, Saving the African American Child, states clearly our expectations:

> ...The capacity of African American children to learn is intact, in spite of the malignant neglect by our social, educational and other systems. The major problems are the problem of resources and the problem with the national, state and local will and commitment

> to insure that our children's needs are met. There is also a problem that we have as African American professionals, parents and communities. We cannot depend on external systems to do the whole job, even though we are entitled to that support. We must never leave the total education of our children in the hands of others! ...Our voices must be raised in an urgent demand for equity and excellence...since there is a limit to what we can expect from public education, there will remain some things we must do for ourselves.[5]

Solutions

The balance of my presentation will outline specific solutions.

1. Early Childhood Education Longitudinal studies have provided strong evidence that children who receive early childhood education have higher graduation rates, greater employability and lower pregnancy and incarceration rates than non-early education children.

2. Effective Schools Implementation Research on effective schools supports the following variables:
   A. Strong principal leadership
   B. High expectations
   C. Emphasis on academic skills
   D. A safe climate
   E. Continuous assessment of pupil progress

3. Cultural-based Curriculum Cultural excellence is essential to academic excellence. The nourishment and development of healthy African American and Hispanic students requires that they acquire high-level academic skills and also that they know the truth about their heritage. Cultural excellence will include political awareness and the potential to detect, confront, transform and withstand racism. It is essential that curriculum and materials be used which help minorities to feel as worthy human beings.

In the words of the NABSE report:

.... Quality and excellence in education for African Americans includes: excellence in the "basic skills," in liberal, vocational, economic, political and spiritual education. But it includes, in addition, excellence in ridding our people of all vestiges of miseducation. This means that the reclamation and restoration of our history and recognition and respect for our rich culture are priorities that are equal in importance to all other priorities.[6]

4. Counseling Professional academic, vocational, interpersonal and cultural counseling must be provided to help minorities clarify their cultural confusions, understand career options, plan academic experiences to achieve career objectives and deal with racial and psychological stress.

5. Employment The promise of a job after graduation is a powerful incentive for young people to remain in school. Proposals for guaranteeing jobs to high school graduates have been made by former New York Schools Chancellor Alvarado and by Governor Cuomo. Both the government and the private sector will have to be convinced that their own vested interests lie in providing meaningful work for young people who might otherwise be non-productive recipients of public support or, worse, require expensive incarceration.

6. Community Education and Support Parental and community support for students is important. African American and Hispanic communities must make demands upon the public schools but must also recognize that some school districts either cannot or will not provide the cultural support our students require.

We have no alternative, and it is our obligation to provide cultural excellence ourselves. Our churches, fraternities and sororities and other groups and agencies must develop community education centers which will strengthen the self-esteem and the desire to achieve in our children and youth.

7. Political Enfranchisement Minority communities must recognize the potential of their political strength. African American and Hispanic communities, if they can consolidate their power, can determine gubernatorial and mayoral races, can decide or influence schoolboard elections or appointments, can determine chancellorships and superintendencies. In asserting their political power minorities will likely have to deal with disloyal politicians of their own groups who sell out their people's economic, educational and political interests for their own personal benefits.

8. Resources Major financial commitments must be made to provide quality education and stem the tide of dropouts. The National Alliance of Black School Educators views adequate resources as an entitlement:

> We are entitled to more than an unequal opportunity to compete with those whose privileged status had been won at our expense, giving them an unfair head start in all competition. We can never forget, or permit others to forget, that our present level of development as a people is due to longstanding racist and exploitative practices and the absence of justice, where the rights of African Americans are concerned. Justice demands fairness, compensation, and retribution.[7]



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9. Drug Prevention At the bare minimum drug prevention will require drug education in every elementary, junior and senior high school, along with detection of users and pushers, with prosecution of the latter. But that is only the tip if the iceberg. The real attack on drugs is to cut off their availability, a monumental though not impossible task. The major sources of traffic have long been identified. The Southwest Asian and latin American pipelines are well known. What is difficult to combat is the enormous wealth of billions of dollars which buys the cooperation of international public officials, some at the highest levels of government.

At the same time that we press for greater vigilance is suppressing drug trafficking, we must reform the education of our youth, in an attempt to remove the reasons they turn to drugs.

The renowned Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, has defined education as "Cultural action for freedom." For all children, but especially for minorities, we must create a new liberating education which stimulates the faculties of creative development and critical thinking, which tells the truth about human history, which elevates the spirit, and which builds skills and knowledge. If we can provide an education "whose content is true, appropriate and relevant and whose processes are democratic and humane,[8] we will save most of our youth.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Carter G. Woodson. The Mis-education of the Negro. The Associated Publishers, Inc., Washington, D.C. 1933, p. xxxii.

[2]Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark, "What Do Blacks Think of Themselves?" Ebony, Vol. xxxvi, No. 1, November, 1980, pp. 176-82.

[3]Saving the African American Child. The National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE), Washington, D.C. 1984, p. 23.

[4]Make Something Happen, Hispanic Policy Development Project, Vol. I, Washington, D.C., 1984, p. 23.

[5]Saving the African American Child, Op. Cit., p. 21.

[6]Ibid, p. 14.

[7]Ibid, p. 21.

[8]Ibid, Letter of introduction.